Writing a Causal Argument

1. Examine the causes or consequences of an interesting or puzzling event, action, trend or phenomenon (for example: "Why does America still love beauty pageants?").

or

2. Speculate on the consequences of an event, action, or trend (for example: "What would happen if professors stopped giving grades at your university?")

Before you begin, consider the following questions:

1. What topic have you chosen to write about? Why?

2. What is your claim? Summarize the reasons you will use to support this causal relationship.

3. What evidence will you use in your essay?

4. How will you deal with opposing views?

Causal Argument Peer Revision Questions

1. What's the best thing about this paper? Be specific.
2. Does the introduction capture your interest and set up the causal question to be investigated? How does it "hook" you?
3. How does the introduction convince you that the event or trend to be examined really exists and that answering the causal question will prove useful?
4. What is the claim or thesis? Is it a cause and effect argument?
5. How does the writer make his or her causal argument (what kind of evidence does he/she use to support the claim)?
6. Identify other strategies the writer uses to establish the causal relationship (direct explanation, indirect explanation, precedent, or analogy). Are these methods sound? Identify any weaknesses that you notice.
7. Do you see evidence of weak causal analysis that can be strengthened on revision (for example, oversimplified or overlooked causes or consequences)?
8. Does the writer mention alternative explanations? Does he/she persuade you to prefer his/her explanations to the alternatives?
9. Comment on the conclusion. Does it provide closure to the essay? What could be done to improve it?
10. What part of the paper do you think the writer should focus on for revision? Be specific, and offer suggestions.

Causal Arguments

Write a two- to three-page (600-800 word) essay that persuades an audience to accept your explanation of the causes of a trend, event, or other phenomenon. Within your essay you should examine alternative explanations or opposing views and present your reasons for rejecting them.

You can frame your issue as either a puzzle or a disagreement. If a puzzle, treat your audience as neutral: they have no prior answer to your causal question in mind. If a disagreement, consider your audience hostile: they endorse a causal explanation different from the one you will present.

The evidence in your argument should come primarily from your own experience and observations. So pick an issue that you find genuinely interesting and that will require little or no formal research. Feel free to consult with me in selecting your topic.

Discussion

Causal argument underlies two of the most common, challenging, and difficult questions we confront in our lives: “Why?” and “What if?” When paleontologists consider the reasons why dinosaurs became extinct, when historians debate the causes of a war, when environmentalists speculate on the effects of pollution, and when psychologists study the effects of racism, they are working in the realm of causal argument. That is, they are examining the complex process by which people, forces, events, and other phenomena interact to bring about other phenomena. Although some people may speak of proving a causal connection between two things, causal argument is by its very nature highly speculative and prone to mistakes. Part of the difficulty, as any scientist can attest, lies in isolating variables. In other words, when examining the many factors that may have caused an event to occur or the many effects that may be traced back to a cause, we must be careful to determine exactly which ones really are valid. Take, for example, the apparently simple case of the Civil War. Anyone who has studied this conflict knows that slavery was an important issue that divided the northern and southern states. In the three decades preceding the Civil War, however, America also was experiencing a number of other important phenomena: social upheaval, migration and immigration, technological changes, and even an economic panic. How can we prove that it was slavery and not one of these other factors that caused the war? The answer is that we can’t. Indeed, as in other kinds of argument, we rarely can prove our causal claims definitively.

What we can do is to present compelling evidence that suggests a connection between what we are labeling as causes and effects. Occasionally, we may be able to find primary or secondary sources that themselves make the connection. Abraham Lincoln and other people from the period preceding and including the Civil War, for instance, spoke of the national tension over slavery, and scholars in subsequent decades have seen a connection between slavery and the war. Such evidence is certainly compelling, but we can strengthen a causal argument by using other strategies. When we use an analogy, for example, *we argue that A caused B in this instance because a similar A caused a similar B in another instance*. The philosopher John Stuart Mill identified several other strategies, including concomitant variation—that is*, if A and B have tended to occur or vary together in the past, it is logical to assume that they have a causal relationship*—and process of elimination. In the latter case, *we would show why C, D, E, and F did not cause B, thus leaving A as the probable cause*. While none of these strategies can prove a cause-effect relationship beyond a shadow of a doubt, together they can make a strong case. In particular, they can help a writer or speaker avoid a logical fallacy likely to emerge in causal argument—that is, the post hoc argument. As suggested by its Latin name, which literally means “after the fact,” a post hoc argument claims that A caused B simply because A preceded B. Because precedence is necessary but not sufficient for a factor to cause an effect, post hoc arguments are at best fallacious and at worst ridiculous. You will want to avoid them and support your causal claim with solid evidence.

Going After the “Deeper Meaning”

Our culture is filled with reminders that we must work at extracting meaning from the words presented to us by others. Undoubtedly, you have heard people say, “Don’t believe everything you read” or “You have to read between the lines.” What those people are really talking about is the act of reading critically—that is, reading with an eye toward understanding not only the words on the page, but also getting at other factors that shape the meaning of the article, story, or poem you are reading. It is important, for example, to determine the writer’s tone, the attitude that he or she betrays toward the subject through choice of words, images, and the like. In assessing tone, you will want to draw some conclusions about whether the writer is being objective and providing a fair or neutral picture of the subject or being subjective and presenting a biased, or one-sided, picture. Often, especially in the case of subjective essays, the writer is pursuing some agenda, or purpose. In any case, writers generally present their ideas in a particular genre, or type of writing, such as a letter to the editor, a business proposal, or a realistic novel. To get the full picture of what you read, you will want to take all of these factors into consideration. Just as you should read critically, you also should listen and view critically, since all forms of communication are shaped by these factors.

Facts and Interpretation

Probably every book, article, speech, documentary, or other source you encounter will include factual material, which is material that most people accept as indisputable. Some examples of facts are dates, quantities, names, and locations. One test of whether something is a fact is to ask yourself whether it answers one of the following questions: Who? What? When? Where? If it does, it likely is a fact. For example, the material in the following sentence is entirely factual: Benjamin Franklin began publishing the Pennsylvania Gazette in 1828 in Philadelphia. Factual material can strengthen an argument because it cannot be disputed and thus provides a solid foundation. An interpretation, on the other hand, involves a conclusion that someone, such as a scholar, has drawn from the facts and thus is disputable. Some examples of interpretations are value judgments, explanations of causes and effects, assessments of meaning, and proposals. You can test whether something is an interpretation by asking yourself whether it answers one of the following questions: Why? How? If it does, it probably is an interpretation. For example, the following sentence contains some interpretation: Benjamin Franklin believed humans could control their destiny and wrote his autobiography to encourage them to exercise their free will. Interpretation strengthens an argument by giving it meaning and substance. Indeed, as you will see later, an argument by definition must include some interpretation. As you also will see, you must give credit to sources when you borrow their interpretations.

Credibility

When you assess a source's credibility, you try to determine how believable it is. First, you should look at the credentials of the author and the publisher. Authors who have advanced degrees in their fields, who work for reputable organizations such as respected universities or government agencies, or who have published other books or articles tend to be more credible than authors who lack any of these credentials. Furthermore, well-known publishers--especially those affiliated with reputable universities--tend to be more credible than other publishers because they have reputations to uphold. In other words, credentials provide some proof that the material in a source is accurate and based on sound reasoning. Because it is much easier to publish material on the Internet than to print it in a book or reputable magazine, print sources tend to be more credible than sources you find on the Internet. A second consideration is timeliness. Sources published or posted recently tend to be more credible than older sources simply because new knowledge gradually becomes available as scholars continue to conduct research. You also will want to look for sources whose authors appear to have considered various interpretations and to have presented fair accounts. Beware of biased sources, which tend to present only evidence that supports one interpretation. In particular, try to avoid a source that has an agenda: a set of political, ideological, or financial goals that the author or authors seek to achieve. One clue that an author has an agenda is a subjective tone--that is, one with an emotional component; stick with objective sources, which avoid emotional language. Finally, evaluate the reasoning in a source's argument. Try to avoid sources that rely on logical fallacies.

How to Write your Essay

1. Like a process analysis, causal analysis links actions or events along a time line, but it differs from process analysis in that it tells us why something happens, is happening, or will probably happen. Therefore, a causal analysis can serve one or more of four main purposes: to entertain, to inform, to speculate, and to argue. Whether we're enrolling in a fitness program, appearing in traffic court, diagnosing a child's illness, or assessing an investment, we're analyzing causes, often for a specific audience. Because purpose and audience are nearly inseparable, it's often impossible to decide which to think about first. However, if you consider your general subject, then you can begin to determine the exigency for your writing and your purpose. Your audience will be those readers best served by your purpose, so you'll need to consider the values they hold and the information they need.

2. Your thesis statement will introduce your subject to that audience, suggest the reason you're analyzing it, and state the ideas about the causes or consequences you want your readers to accept. Unless you're absolutely certain, using phrases such as "probably" and "most likely" will enhance your credibility with your readers. You'll also need to think critically about different causes or consequences (primary, contributory, immediate, remote, and so on) as well as about whether you want to explain the causes or consequences in chronological or emphatic order, using transitional words or phrases to help your readers follow your line of thinking.

3. What conclusions can you draw from your analysis? What inferences? What implications? If you answer these three questions, your conclusion will offer you an opportunity to push your own thinking as well as that of your audience-and you'll write a meaningful conclusion, one that goes beyond a weary restatement of your introduction.